

FROM THE AUTHOR OF "SAFE WORD"

N. von Wolf

*These
Tears*

These Tears



N. von Wolf

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Trigger Warnings

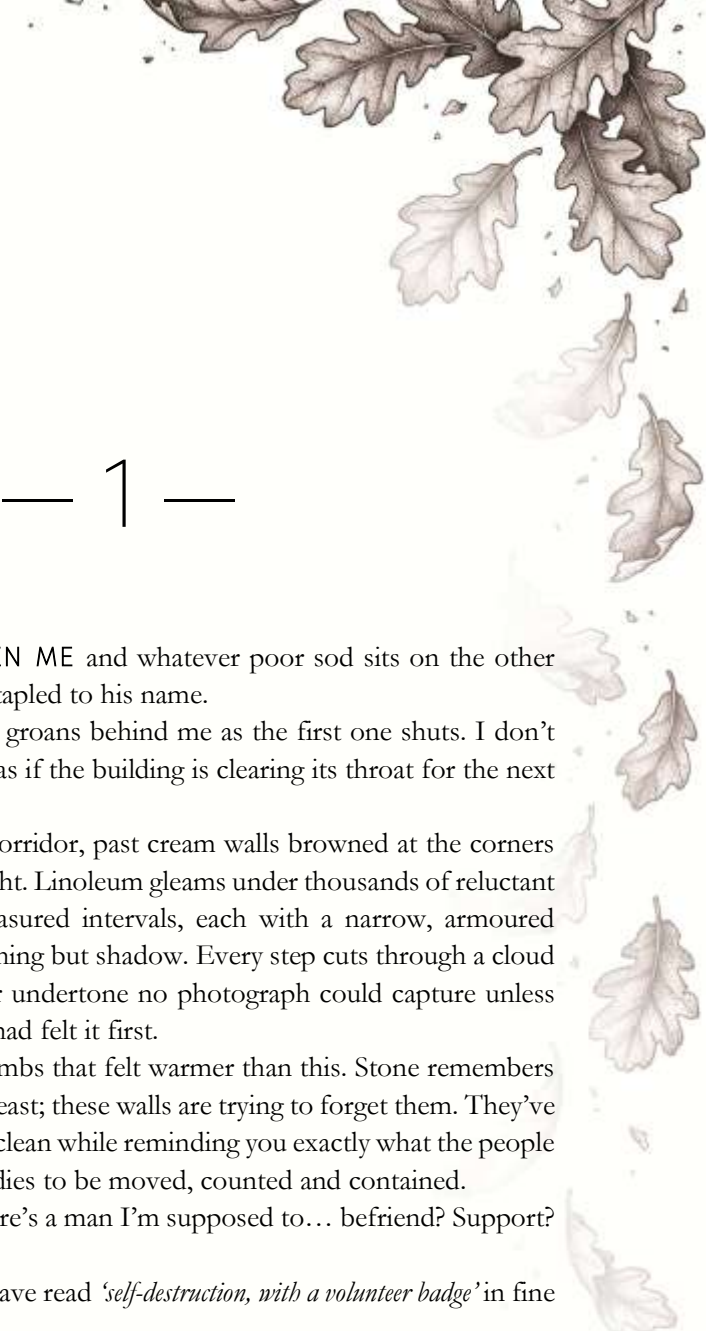
Emotional abuse,	Murder references,
Coercive control,	Double murder,
Psychological manipulation,	Patricide references,
Gaslighting behaviour,	Arson references,
Power imbalance,	Violent death,
Possessive behaviour,	Domestic abuse,
Obsessive behaviour,	Family abuse,
Kidnapping and captivity,	Implied childhood abuse,
Unlawful confinement,	Implied childhood neglect,
Forced isolation,	Implied sexual abuse of a minor,
Forced proximity,	Sexual abuse survivor,
Coerced domesticity,	False rape allegations,
Forced engagement,	Sexual blackmail,
Public relationship coercion,	Implied reproductive coercion,
Threats and intimidation,	Sexual coercion,
Mass violence threats,	Sexual exploitation,
Stalking and surveillance,	Dubious consent,
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Escape restriction,	Non-consensual penetration,
Prison setting,	Forced oral sex,
Prolonged incarceration,	Non-consensual touching,
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Obedience dynamics,
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Photography kink,
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Low self-worth,
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Being hunted,
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Implied parental abduction,
Implied suicide,
Drowning death,
Childbirth death,
Death and grief,
Explicit profanity,
Religious violence,
Punishment themes,
Monstrosity themes,
Violent philosophy references.



ACT 1



— 1 —

THREE DOORS BETWEEN ME and whatever poor sod sits on the other side with a murder charge stapled to his name.

I stiffen when the metal groans behind me as the first one shuts. I don't expect it to echo so loudly, as if the building is clearing its throat for the next part.

I trail along the overlit corridor, past cream walls browned at the corners and scuffed to shoulder height. Linoleum gleams under thousands of reluctant footsteps. Doors sit at measured intervals, each with a narrow, armoured window that gives away nothing but shadow. Every step cuts through a cloud of bleach, dust and a fouler undertone no photograph could capture unless the person behind the lens had felt it first.

I've snapped shots of tombs that felt warmer than this. Stone remembers the hands that shaped it, at least; these walls are trying to forget them. They've been made to erase, to look clean while reminding you exactly what the people inside are to the system: bodies to be moved, counted and contained.

Behind the last door, there's a man I'm supposed to... befriend? Support? Teach, or...?

The paperwork should have read *'self-destruction, with a volunteer badge'* in fine print.

My pulse seems to be trying to outrun me, but I keep my face smooth, mouth set like I'm here by choice, like I'm not listening for the next groan of metal as if it's going to call out my name.

In all honesty, I've made worse decisions. Heartbreak scrambled the part of my brain responsible for self-preservation.

The guard beside me doesn't bother hiding his boredom.

‘First time?’ he asks.

I swallow back the unease, eyeing his cap with shielded disdain.

Uniforms have never inspired much confidence in me. They often stood on my sister’s doorstep reciting procedure, while her abusive husband remained unblamed. Perhaps it wasn’t the whole system that failed her, just the badges that frequented her address.

‘Is it that obvious?’ I ask, already regretting the question.

He shrugs. ‘You look it.’

I wrinkle my nose at him. Lovely. Like a lamb to slaughter.

My attention – and anxiety – drag back to the final door. It opens with a mechanical shudder like something straight out of a disaster film. I half expect black smoke to start pouring through the gap.

It’s colder in this area. No windows, just CCTV cameras and signs that warn off unauthorised items.

My eyes catch on the bottom of the list: *string, gum, hope* – though I might have made up that last one.

‘Gum?’ I say as we pass through the checkpoint, where paint peels in small strips from the institutional green walls. They remind me of old, forgotten scabs. Might look almost macabre in a photo.

Mum’s reprimand resurfaces in the back of my head: *Easy on the sarcasm, Leah*.

‘They get creative around here,’ says the guard escorting me, his badge crooked and his tone bone-dry. ‘She’s all yours, George.’

A barred gate moans open and a heavyset man steps through. He moves with the weary confidence of someone who stopped believing in urgency years ago.

‘Afternoon,’ he says, his South London accent flattened by the stale heat of the corridor. It isn’t his voice that makes my face tighten, or even the cough that follows, sounding bad enough to finish him off with the next heave. It’s the smell. Like vinegar, stale coffee and something sourly familiar in the worst way.

I used to breathe that in every day as a teenager, back when my dad favoured the bottle. You don’t forget an odour that could double as paint stripper.

His bloodshot eyes sweep over me in stark, clinical motions.

My shoulder lifts to feel the weight of the missing camera strap, fingers

closing around air before I remember the camera is locked behind two gates and a sheet of reinforced glass. I didn't mind them taking the handbag. It's just receipts and lipstick I hang on to but never remember to apply.

But the camera—

It is not merely an object. It is a habit, a shield, an escape route; the thing I raise between myself and anything I cannot bear to examine directly.

I'm still nursing the dismissive finger-wag the woman at the gate gave me when she locked my equipment away.

Without it, the fluorescent light seems to reach inwards, revealing the parts of me better left in the dark.

I really *should* try therapy again.

Grunting inelegantly, the guard jerks his head for me to follow.

As I fall into step behind him, our shadows begin stretching across the corridor floor, and my nerves cinch tighter. Every step feels like a fresh entry in the ledger of my own stupidity.

My sister always said I had the devil's own stubbornness and that it would get me hurt one day. I bet she didn't think the lighting would be fluorescent, the paint would be peeling, or that the devil would come in shackles.

A camera pegs me from the corner, blinking red as if to warn me off while I still have the chance.

Which is exactly the kind of feeling that keeps me right where I am. Photographing trauma for a living, unfortunately, does not qualify me to bring a lens into His Majesty's prison, even for this programme. Grudgingly, it had been the strongest reason for my application.

'You're in Visitation Room Seven,' George mutters, pointing ahead. 'Your placement's been authorised for non-contact supervision.'

I blink up at him in question.

'A probable long-timer. Restraints authorised. Don't let the charm fool you,' he clarifies succinctly.

I stare at the tops of my boots. My silence gives me away and George catches on, filling in the rest: my new *best friend* behind that door is on remand.

Even with what little I'd managed to glean from his file, that still lands wrong. Remand is meant to be temporary. Seven years of it could only mean extension after extension, each one argued before a judge.

Goodness. His case is so tangled it has become its own organism.

And that was one of the splinters that lodged into my brain when the

Programme Coordinator slid a stack of anonymised summaries across the desk – options on paper in the shape of broad case categories, as if people could be shortlisted like equipment.

I worked through them one by one while she explained which placement risked which part of my mind. I weighed offences and notes until that file turned from *risky case* to *pulsing question*.

I tell myself it wasn't anything specific that made me go for Crane – definitely not the way the light in the photo stapled to the file caught his pale blue eyes and turned them almost translucent.

Definitely not.

Restraints, George mentioned.

I file that somewhere between *cheating fiancé* and *compulsive self-saboteur*. Because what else would explain me signing up for a programme that pairs emotionally derailed civilians like me with inmates no one wants to be near?

Jesus Christ, I could've taken up fucking pottery when therapy shot blind.

Or just... disappeared quietly into Greenland with my camera and Riesling.

Instead, I'm here chasing ghosts in my black jeans and an AC/DC shirt I may have overgrown – because I wasn't sure what the dress code was for *meet your last mistake*.

A barred door clanks and sighs open, ushering me into a secure visitation room so barren that even my most optimistic creative gene retreats in horror.

The concrete has never seen paint save for the dark stains climbing partway up the walls. If I didn't know I was in prison, I'd think someone had begun converting the room into a medieval dungeon and abandoned the project halfway through.

My eyes swipe sideways and clock him in the middle of the open space.

Elias Crane.

His broad back is to me, thick black hair dragged back as if every rebellious curl has been bullied into obedience with a promise to come apart the moment he makes one wrong movement.

As my gaze falls to his feet, recognition rattles through me: chains span from his wrists to ankles, threaded through a steel ring bolted to the floor. My hand jerks towards the camera bag that isn't there.

Pointless reflex.

Irritating.

'Restraints authorised. Don't let the charm fool you.' The guard's words echo in my ears. Seems like they really don't take chances with Crane.

I ease the panic out on the next breath, reminded *again* that having no camera around my chest means I'm on my own. With a head full of bad instincts.

Still. The glint of the chains as they catch the light against his alabaster skin—

It's a composition begging to be frozen in a frame.

He sits hunched over the bolted desk while I cross the room towards the opposite chair with a brittle semblance of calm. The nearer I get, the more the room appears to have been measured for an ordinary man and forced to accommodate a giant. His shoulders are broad enough to throw shadow across the entire table; his forearms heavy with dense muscle.

Old scars stripe his arms in thin, pale cuts like faded tally marks of some private war.

His hands are clasped loosely on the tabletop, wrists married by institutional steel, but there's no surrender in him. He isn't slumped so much as contained; wound tight and still, as if patience is just another way of defiance.

'Afternoon, Mr Crane,' I try, because *good afternoon* feels like a lie in here.

As I sink into my seat, my gaze catches on the line of his jaw and the thick beard dusting it dark – enough to make him look dangerous, not enough to make him look unkempt. In fact, his face is one a person might trust right up to the moment reality shows otherwise.

And right now, those eyes – rimmed with thick fans of obsidian lashes – are fixed on his hands.

There's something bruised in the set of his mouth.

His thumb moves once over the pale scar beside his cuff. For one disorienting second, the monster described in the briefing slips out of focus.

My finger twitches over my lap where the camera bag typically sits.

He doesn't look up in the first few heartbeats we sit in silence. Just lets the quiet do its work.

My gaze betrays me immediately, tracking the aristocratic line of his nose and the firm mouth beneath eyes seemingly incapable of kindness. My mind starts reducing him to composition and I can't switch it off.

Finally, he slowly lifts his lashes. As if deciding I have earned the risk of

being seen.

The blue comes with it.

No—not merely blue. Clear, cold blue. Bright enough to look out of place against the ambience.

The contrast itself is a small, private violence. The brutal geometry of his face set against something so lucid reads more like *god* than *human*.

My stomach clenches as my mind supplies the reminder my body keeps trying to file away: those eyes belong to a man they have to chain to the floor.

I can't even focus on words. Part of me is already framing the shots whether I like it or not.

Shadow against bone. Pale skin against steel.

The photographer in me is a beast that lives off instinct, but the rest of me is slower to follow.

He isn't just an image. He's a dangerous man, and I'm suddenly aware that observing him too closely might be its own kind of mistake.

He doesn't move or offer any kind of smile – even just to ease my nerves.

I curse myself for having been too busy armouring myself with sarcasm to properly absorb what the officer had been telling me on the way here.

'My name is Leandra Nottingham. Pleased to meet you,' I say, extending a hand—

Then I lock onto the chains and stop short.

Like a bloody idiot.

His gaze drops hawkishly to where my hand hovers, but he doesn't move. Just sits there with that deceptively relaxed posture, shoulders down.

Christ – the chains.

Of course. He can't shake my hand. He's bolted down.

I let my fingers curl inwards, retracting with as much grace as I can salvage. But no sooner do I pull back than his stare climbs up the length of my arm, almost like a physical thing, until those glacial eyes meet mine and hold.

'I apologise...' I murmur, trying for *steady* – and failing.

Of all the bright ideas I've had in the past year, this one ranks top of the list – sitting across from a man accused of murder, trying to play this like a fucking Sunday tea party.

Clearing my throat, I take inventory of myself.

'Call me Leah,' I add in an attempt to ground whatever this is in something warmer.

Some of the static in the air eases as the knots in his shoulders relax slightly. But it could be just my imagination.

He leans back into the unforgiving metal chair, his weight drawing a low creak from it. In the silence, the sound rolls like thunder.

Then he exhales, the breath rasping as though it has scraped its way out of him.

Glancing down at the clinical table between us, I reposition in my own chair. My heels scrub faintly against the hard floor when I fire off my first question.

‘Are you unhappy with me being here?’

Because *I* am – unhappy. With myself. With this whole bloody decision. With the desperation that had dragged me through the application, the vetting – all to keep my thoughts away from the wreckage of my own life.

And now here I am, pretending I know what I’m doing.

He keeps staring without letting his attention wander over me as one might expect from a man. It never drops to my mouth, throat or chest. He watches only my eyes and the small, involuntary things they betray.

A corner of his mouth tilts. Not a smile – barely even a promise of one – but his interest settles more precisely on my face, as though he has dragged a confirmation out of me without me allowing it.

Exhaling, I give him a humourless smile. ‘We can sit in the quiet, too, if that’s what you need?’

The only response is in his eyes, as they flick unhurriedly to my mouth, then back up again.

The silence bleeds, rebounds against the wall.

I could still pack up tonight and catapult myself to Greenland, find somewhere cold enough to freeze every bad decision still brewing in my head.

‘Leah,’ he says.

My name. Just that.

And I was right – like the sound of burning logs in the dead of a winter night, his voice runs down my spine with all the gentleness of a wildfire.

‘That’s right,’ I say, softer.

But nothing else comes. And now I’m aware he hasn’t blinked for another while. His intensity starts to scratch at my skin.

‘My dad was incarcerated once,’ I mutter, just to puncture the air.

There’s a faint reaction when his breath snags, but he still makes no effort

to move the conversation ahead.

‘I won’t pretend I know what it’s like. I don’t.’ I lift one shoulder, eyes on the table. ‘He was in for assault.’

I don’t elaborate on the reason. Crane’s brief contained almost nothing about the allegations, only that he had been charged with patricide.

I hardly remember that time my dad had been in prison because I was seven. The neighbour was a violent prick. Beat his wife, his kids. One day my dad caught him in the act and hit him back.

‘He was in for two years. I visited on Sundays. I was happy to see it didn’t change him.’

A breath.

‘I was scared it might.’

I’m uncertain if I’m boring him to death at this point.

My fingertips find the engagement ring at the base of my finger and start turning it slowly.

This is a complete waste of time. I can’t take photos. He doesn’t talk—

Driven by adrenaline, I let the backrest catch my weight with a soft thump. Then I cross my arms. Cross my legs.

And meet his stare dead-on.

‘I’m here to try and make your time inside easier. To talk to you. Or just listen. You don’t have to like me, but I signed up and so did you. If you’ve changed your mind, I’d rather you open that pretty mouth of yours and say it so we can move on.’

He cocks a thick dark brow, the bright caustics in his eyes flaring momentarily. The corner of the said mouth twitches, and an unexpected warmth skims down my spine.

Thought it might jolt him a little.

I just didn’t expect the effect of his smile to jolt me straight back.

‘Pretty mouth of mine?’ he echoes quietly. Then his gaze sharpens. ‘So you’re one of *those*.’

The accent tries to be British, but there’s something in the way he stretches the vowels and rolls the Rs.

My brows pull lower. ‘One of what?’ I ask, unable to follow.

He tilts his head a fraction, looking at me as if he’s tracing bone structure with a scalpel.

‘Romancing the reprehensible.’

Reprehensible?

Wordy.

'I'm not here to romance you,' I reply flatly, battling to keep a smirk from springing out at his concealed eloquence. 'You're not my type.' The lie makes him smile wider. 'Chains and charm give me heartburn.'

Just because I'm unable to process why my instincts appreciate his amusement – and those cheekbones – I say biting, 'I'm surprised you know big words like that.'

And the smile's gone.

'Because I'm behind bars, I don't read?'

Angling my head slightly, I realise it's the first thing he'd given me: *I read*. I'd rather be talking about what got him to the point of ending a life – but clearly, he wasn't going to let me close without barbed wire between us. So I grab on to that fragile thread and hold for dear life.

I take a deep breath. 'Apologies. I didn't mean it like that.'

The quiet trickles slowly. Though fragile, it's enough to loosen the tension by a fraction.

'What are you reading now?' I ask, tone lower, less derisive.

'Nothing.'

I hum at that, unsure if he's just deflecting or giving me an honest response.

'I could send a book in for you, if you'd like.'

His head tilts sideways. It's the first movement without calculation. 'Why?'

I match the angle. 'Purely selfish reasons. I'm thinking... if I give you more words, you might actually say some back to me rather than just stare.'

That twitch again – not quite a smile, but close enough. And it's genuine.

If it weren't for the prison greys and the chain, if I'd seen him on a run in the park – handsome in that wrong-kind-of-right way – I'd probably have looked twice.

'What are you doing here, Leah?' The question leaves him without that earlier bite, and the amusement somehow thins out of him. With it goes the unsettling pleasure he seemed to find in making me uncomfortable.

I lift my shoulders, unsure whether I'm answering him or asking myself. They don't fall straight away, just let the truth linger atop them for a second.

'I like volunteering,' The breath that sticks to my throat makes it sound rehearsed. 'I'm a photographer,' I add quickly, deciding that if I offer

something of myself, he might offer something back. 'I volunteer wherever I can find genuine emotion. I like to try and capture it.'

He lets out a dry sound that might pass as a chuckle, then pushes forward again. The cuffs scrape against the table's edge.

The motion unfolds my own arms.

'So you came to a *prison*. To find... *emotion*?' he murmurs sardonically.

It would be hard to explain my entire purpose as an artist to him. Emotion isn't just joy at a birth, or tears at a wedding, or grief at a funeral.

It's everything. History. It's what lingers in rooms long after people have gone. The charge left behind after an argument, the indent on the wall after a frustrated outburst. The stillness after a slammed door. It's longing soaked into things – plaster, wood, clothes... people.

'*Especially* in prison,' I tell him, watching for any changes on his face. 'Whatever happened to bring you here began with an emotion, Elias.' His lashes lower at the sound of his name, the eyes softening. Then I hear the words back in my head and how presumptuous they sound. 'It's everywhere. It's in the way those chains rest on your wrists.' My gaze flicks to the glint of metal between us. 'In the way you dodge my questions. The way you almost smile, but don't.'

The tightness around his mouth falters. His fingers, previously curled as if expecting a blow, open slightly. Shoulders shift down.

Then—

'Guard!' he calls. Calm. Without looking away from me.

The locks at the far end of the room clank in quick succession, and a few seconds later, George appears behind the door. His red-veined eyes narrow as he looks from Crane to me.

I smile at them both as I begin to stand.

'The lovely lady is leaving,' Crane declares.

Nodding once, I try to keep it smooth and polite.

My boots claim the tiles, a socially acceptable smile fixing to my face.

'What's the matter, Crane? Don't like brunettes?' The guard scoffs at him.

'Not my type.' Crane ruffles my feathers for the final time as my heels clack towards the exit.

'Have a great day, Elias,' I murmur.

Walking out of the facility, I keep turning the visit over in my head, looking for something useful enough to justify the drive.

On the surface, there isn't much.

I came here intending to do something decent and left with my motives picked apart and handed back to me like they were something to be embarrassed of.

But as I reach the car park, my jaw already aches from clenching it. Old disappointments have a way of recognising one another. They now gather somewhere behind my tongue until I begin to consider swallowing optional.

I pull the belt over me and clamp my hands around the wheel.

Because it's not that simple.

There's something simmering beneath the disappointment.

Crane hadn't been indifferent. Guarded – sure. Defensive – definitely. But not indifferent.

He reacted to books. To being asked real questions. To his name. That was more than he'd probably meant to give me. Whether it was annoyance, instinct or something closer to nerves, I couldn't yet tell.

As I turn the ignition, my camera bag catches my eye on the passenger seat. My stomach knots.

Elias Crane isn't a breakthrough. He is not a distraction.

I repeat both lies as I start the car.

After I miss the first junction homewards, I find myself wondering which book might make him speak for longer than a few sentences.

He gave me almost nothing, and I'm already turning the absence into an invitation.

Something in that room made me aware he noticed the addiction to corruption in me too. That should be my only warning.

Should.

But it's a hook instead.



‘HOW’S THIS SUPPOSED to help, exactly?’ Marina grumbles at my side, while holding up a small branch for my camera.

Peering through the lens, I adjust the aperture until the bark blurs just enough to soften into the background, while the branches frame the storm clouds beyond.

‘It’s the moment right before something breaks,’ I say. ‘The sky is holding back a scream, the branch wants to snap. Everything is caught in that last breath before the collapse.’

I imagine he might understand it. A man who chooses words as carefully as Crane might see what I see without me having to explain it.

The image freezes as the shutter clicks.

‘So ominous,’ Marina grumbles, more to herself.

I’ve never had a thought like this cross my mind while working, but suddenly, I wish I were more like her. A photographer who finds beauty in the softer things like laughter, sunlit fields, all other hopeful things people write poems about.

But I never have.

Marina’s lens follows the last red flower in the meadow. Mine turns towards a branch split down its centre.

I’ve always been drawn to what remains after the impact: the silence, the damage, the shape grief leaves behind when no one is watching. That’s what I know *how* to capture.

The evidence that pain leaves behind.

In the body. In choices. In everything people can’t say aloud. Perhaps that’s why I trust it. Perhaps that’s why I think he might too.

And right now, it’s the only thing I know how to offer him. Clouds and lightning.

I’m not giving him the darkness. I’m giving him what comes at the end of it – something that feels both like relief and freedom. Or the closest thing to it.

‘Right,’ Marina says, but her tone disagrees. ‘I’m sure he won’t take one

look at the dead bark and clouds and say you're weird.'

I consider that for a moment.

'I'll write on the back what it's meant to say.' I'm aware I don't yet know Elias Crane well enough to gauge how he'll take this, and that most people wouldn't see beyond the *bark* and the *clouds*. But if books are the one place he bares his teeth, I can start with that. Find the right quotation, see if it causes a change. Ride the next wave from there.

I'm not doing this purely to get to know him, I'm doing it because I can't stand silence for long; it starts to feel like failure.

I hate that my mind turns things into a challenge, hate even more that part of me wants a reaction simply to prove I can get one. But if I make him respond – even a little – perhaps it will ease whatever presses down on him. That is the generous version of the excuse, anyway.

Marina lowers the branch with a scowl and tosses it onto the sodden path, mud splashing her wellies. Then, with her signature irritation, she tugs the cuffs of her bubblegum-pink jacket back into place.

'Why are you trying so hard, anyway?' she drawls, glancing skywards as thunder growls somewhere beyond.

'What do you mean?' I blink at her, genuinely taken aback.

Because she's an artist too – granted, one who does weddings and happy stuff, but still... I hadn't expected this kind of cynicism from her. 'It's not just for my portfolio. It's volunteer work. Why would I do it if I wasn't all in?'

She's shaking her head before I even get a chance to finish.

'Because this isn't one of the shelters, Leah. This is a prison. Proper dangerous men.'

I don't deflect. I don't defend him. But I also don't apologise for the choice.

Most people wouldn't think to volunteer at a prison unless they were chasing redemption themselves. Or punishment. Or to run away from other broken things – like I am. My best friend's voicing what plenty think but never say.

Still, those inside the prison are there for a reason. And Crane's reason, while scary, isn't enough to make me step back.

'The thing I keep chasing—' I say aloud, keeping my eyes on the path because if I look at her, I'll have to admit she's right. 'Something powerful had to have driven him as far as to do something horrible. I want to frame it.' Understand it.

Because it might help me understand myself too.

‘Sure.’ She crosses her arms as we start along the path skirting Burrator Reservoir.

The air smells of damp earth and woodsmoke that tingles against the back of my throat. Leaves skitter across the ground in gusts of bronze and blood-red before they find themselves beneath our wellies. Behind us, the lake lies still like a sheet of tarnished silver under the clouds.

‘I don’t want to undermine your art. I’m asking why you’re driving nearly four hours for a man who kills people – who, by the way, you don’t even know.’

‘One person,’ I correct, hating myself for hearing how absurd that sounds. ‘He killed *one* person. Or... he is *accused* of it. He hasn’t been convicted.’

Marina snorts. ‘Oh well then, it’s fine! Let me just adjust my moral compass – only *one* body, folks! Worth the fuel!’

A chuckle escapes me.

The reasonable part of me agrees with her.

Crane hadn’t seemed pleased to have me there. Yet the more I think about him folded over the table, staring at his hands as though holding himself together, the less convinced I am that his boredom was what drove me out of there.

He’d applied to the programme, after all.

Was it *me*, then? Was it just the fact that he didn’t want *me* to be his civilian contact?

Rejection isn’t a good feeling.

I trail its gloom along the path, staring at the tips of my navy wellies until I stop and decide to capture this moment that bleeds through me.

The lens doesn’t care that they’re filthy. Or that they’ve taken me into that filth.

I can’t help thinking of the silence he left me with.

I frame the shot low: mud-caked tips in the corner, autumn leaves scattered around them; the navy stark against the dull browns and washed-out golds.

Some of my pictures are for my own personal portfolio. And this one goes straight in there. It’s more like proof that I have left a mark, even if some people had already decided I didn’t matter. Crane included – which is ridiculous considering I’ve met him once and shouldn’t care what he thinks of me.

'My offer still stands.' Marina drags me out of the mental cave I've slipped into.

When I lift my head, she is watching me with that soft, assessing look that makes the back of my neck itch – as if I were a bruise she keeps checking for change of colour.

She's crouched over another flower. Her camera fires off a series of *clicks* and she returns to staring at me.

Tugging at my woollen scarf to rid myself of the sensation, I raise my camera and take a picture of her face.

She lifts a hand to shield herself, but the shutter has already snapped. I've become very good at catching moments people don't mean to give me. Dark ones especially.

I'm also trying to avoid the topic, but that's beside the point.

Thunder grumbles again overhead, closer. I squint towards the battered clouds.

'Would you mind giving me a little more time to think on it?' I mumble. 'My head's not in a place for wedding photos.'

Definitely not wedding photos.

She'd asked me to work with her, shooting clients, editing portfolios. Marina and her fiancé run a cosy little studio at home in Crawley. And while Oswald helps out at his dad's dairy farm, he swings by to lend her a hand when she needs one.

I shake the cold from my fingers, imagining it's the bite of jealousy I'm flinging away.

Ron and I were together for ten years, but I cannot stop wondering whether something shifted when he completed his medical degree and moved back to Colchester.

Up until a few months ago, I'd forced myself to believe it was the two-hour drive that put the cracks in everything, not something else. Not *someone* else.

When I finally moved to London, thinking we'd deal with the distance properly, he took a job at a nearby hospital and for a while the doubts quieted. Life just carried on.

Until it collapsed into mud and ash.

'It's been a year, Leah,' Marina reminds me.

She doesn't need to add to it.

That timeframe is saturated with too many echoes.

‘What if I introduce you to someone? Oz has some nice friends.’

I roll my eyes hard enough to feel the sting. ‘If you say the words *blind* and *date* in the same sentence, I will scream.’

‘I just worry about you, love!’ she calls, hurrying to catch up as I barrel down the footpath, eyeing my red Ford – cruelly parked too far. ‘You’re a thirty-two-year-old beautiful, smart, talented woman! And you’re acting like you’ve already retired from the human race!’

‘I’m doing okay,’ I insist, tugging my sleeves over my fists. ‘I need to understand why I ignored what I ignored before I jump head-first into a relationship again.’

The hush that follows isn’t hostile. If anything, it’s a kind of truce, but I can hear her thoughts spinning like cogs, still plotting my emotional rescue.

Then she halts abruptly and throws out a finger like a weapon. ‘Listen here!’ She’s five foot one but built like a storm when emotion takes her. I take another snapshot of her – finger and all. ‘Your mum and dad are arseholes!’

I blink, lower the camera. My brows go up, but curiously enough – I don’t argue.

‘They should’ve backed you when you left Ronald – not spun it ‘round like *you’d* done something wrong. Cheating’s out of order. Full stop! No excuses! If he wanted out, he should’ve ended it first before he went and shagged that paediatric nurse!’

The words from his phone lance through me. A hotel address. Her name. His promise that he would end it with me soon. Marina’s voice gives them sound, and my next breath fails halfway in.

Spinning on my heel, I make a beeline for the car, boots splashing over mud, but it doesn’t drown out the riot of memories in my head. I’m trying – failing, *hoping* – to banish the relentless surge pulled from the pit of my mind where I keep all things I don’t want to examine too closely.

Darting after me, Marina huffs and puffs, trying to match stride for stride.

And despite my heart threatening to grab onto the rising panic attack and ride it out to oblivion, I can’t stop thinking that she’s right. Every word cuts clean, each one justified. But none makes the weight in my chest any lighter.

‘I must’ve done something to push him away.’

The thought comes too easily, which is probably the problem.

My parents taught me from a young age that when bad things happen, you search inwards for the reason. And if Sartre’s right and hell is other people, then maybe I’ve built my own cell and trapped both Ron and me inside it. So

of course I'm already doing it with Crane after one meeting. As if every rejection has to mean there's something fundamentally wrong with me. As perceptive as he is, he'd probably locked onto that flaw and recoiled.

But is a woman's worth truly measured by how long someone stays?

'As *if*!' Marina barks, hurling herself against the driver's door like a bodyguard. My self-loathing and my faults crash into her where she stands firmly against the onslaught. 'Some people are just fucking arseholes!' she snaps.

I bite the inside of my cheek. Because the rational part of me suddenly takes all those insecurities and flings them into the body of water stretching behind me.

'Is that your new favourite word?' I murmur through clenched teeth as I reach for the door handle beneath her armpit.

She frowns at me as though I've insulted her war cry. Then she softens just a touch. 'You are worth it.'

My lungs seize around a breath.

Have I said something aloud while spiralling into myself?

She says it casually, like it costs nothing.

I feel it, too. For a brief moment.

Then it slips away again when Ron's voice crawls back into the space Marina opened, followed by my parents' reprimands.

And that is *the* problem.

This is why I need more time – because when someone says something like that, I want it to *stick*. To find somewhere solid inside me and stay there, rather than slipping through the same old cracks.

I need to find whatever piece of me still believes it's possible.



Week after week, I send a photo to Crane. Rebecca – the programme coordinator – never reports that he has refused them, so I tell myself he must be keeping them seeing that they aren't returned. I start watching for the postman more often than I should.

After the second week, the programme coordinator leaves me a polite voicemail reminding me that the messages on the back must remain relevant to the placement.

By week three, she leaves me a polite voicemail about appropriate

boundaries.

By the end of week five, I ignore the existence of the word *appropriate* altogether.

I trawl through ebooks for lines from old classics and philosophy books to write on the backs of the developed photos – little tests, really, to see whether anything gets through. His file said he had studied philosophy, so it could be hit or miss.

The branch-and-storm photo got Rumi's '*The wound is the place where the light enters you.*'

The week after, I dropped my teacup on the front porch. The spill of the tea fanned out in jagged tendrils, and the morning fog licked around the edges, eager to join the scene.

'I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become.' I channelled some of Carl Jung's certainty into the words and sent them to him.

There were other small offerings too. But no reply ever came. Not a word. Not even a note from the programme coordinator.

Then, finally, I mistook a fox for something monstrous in the woods near Burrator one day. It held its ground in the bramble, teeth bared, yellow stare fixed on me as if it enjoyed the wait. It reminded me of Crane at that table. Afraid, but dangerous anyway.

So I decided it would be the last one – my final photo after two months of trying to breathe life into this effort.

Mary Shelley had the right words. Hard enough to sting, but not enough to wound.

'A fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster.'

I wrote it on the back, pressed the photo into an envelope, and let go of another project that was meant to keep my mind off the self-pity.

And two days later, just after I decide not to flip off my laptop at the obscene price on a snowsuit, the postman drops a small white letter through the letterbox.

Such a clean, ordinary act. It shouldn't have got my chest in an uproar when I saw it happen.

As I pick it up, I examine the red stamp smeared halfway across the flap: *Checked by Mailroom Officer – HMP Stonebrook.*

Excitement sparks inside me and I hold it with light fingers as if it might burn me.

I walk to my kitchen table with suppressed urgency, my thumb moving over the edge without thought. By the time I reach the chair, curiosity is bleeding out of my every pore, and I have to force myself to let go of the letter.

For a moment, I only look at it resting on the table. Because it might contain rejection as well as something worse. But since hope should be dosed in small amounts, I finally reach for the flap.

Opening it carefully, I find a matt-finished photo inside. Of the fox – slightly warped at the corners the way photographs get when they're handled too often.

My stomach plummets.

He returned it.

But when I flip it over, the breath stutters right back into me.

Beneath my quote, in ink several shades darker, another sentence rolls out in impossibly neat cursive – too disciplined for the violence my imagination keeps trying to assign to his hands.

'Where is this from?'

A few words should not be enough to loosen the knot in my sternum. Somehow, they are.

A smile pulls at my mouth.

He wrote back.

After all this time, he actually wrote back.

Maybe he kept the others, after all. Maybe he recognised the earlier quotes and didn't need to ask. Or maybe this one simply caught his attention in a different way.

Either way, he answered.

And now? I can't stop wondering: why this quotation?

Does he think I compared him to a monster?

With lungs full of static, I tear through my drawers for a pen and paper, pages flying in every direction.

Back on the chair, pen poised, heart in my throat, the rhythm of my finger-tapping against the barrel infuses me.

Control the panic. Make a plan.

'The fish is circling the bait,' I whisper to the photo, eyes locked on his handwriting. Then, because my mind always has to make things uglier than they are, I think: *now what? How do I keep him talking?*

I scribble the address first, drawing out every letter to postpone writing

the note itself.

His name sits at the top like a curse and a challenge.

Drifting to the bookshelf, my gaze settles on the battered old *Frankenstein* volume wedged between two art books, its spine cracked and softened with years.

I start scribbling:

'You can read it yourself.

I'll bring you the title,

if you lend me your face.

'The book will come with me – if you let me see you through my lens.'

It might backfire, I realise.

It might make him feel cornered, like I'm trying to condition him into playing.

Scowling down at the note, I watch the tip of the pen hovering as if it could force the words to rearrange themselves into something safer and less *blah*.

I'm just about to crumple the paper when the front door creaks open, then shuts like a verdict.

My head snaps up. Anna stands inside the door.

Breath leaves me too quickly.

One eye is bruised purple beneath her fringe.

My lungs collapse in on themselves. Then heat floods my ribs as my eyes flit all over her form in worry.

Outside, autumn rain needles the windows, blurring the coldness beyond the glass into streaks of grey.

Wordless, seething, I tuck the note into the envelope and abandon it on the table as I rise to my feet, ready to go into battle – until I recognise two suitcases wheeling behind her, leaving faint wet trails on the floor.

My fists open. The air trapped in my throat leaves in a broken rush, and my knees nearly follow it to the floor.

'Oh, thank fuck!' I blurt, stumbling forward and throwing my arms around her as if I could anchor her there with the force of it.

She had finally left the bastard.

Relief swallows the noise of the world. For a while, at least. There are bags to carry upstairs, tea to make, questions I know how to ask carefully. Because Anna and I have been here before, at square one, when I left Ron. We know the laborious mechanics of starting over.

Over the following days, I carry the thought of the letter around like contraband, turning it over in my head. Every possible answer feels wrong.

Too warm – and I sound desperate. Though I am.

Too clever – and I sound like I'm performing.

Too blunt – I risk making him recoil entirely.

I don't want to disgust him, don't want to invite him too close... I don't want to compromise this fragile thread he has thrown my way.

So I go through the motions of life with his handwriting burning a hole in my brain, making tea, answering emails, pretending I am not composing and destroying sentences in my head every waking minute.

Today I've had more orders coming through my online shop, and the work around them drives me downstairs into the darkroom. I check my photographs for flaws, trim and package those already cured, then peg the fresh prints along the drying line. There's something liberating about the work that comes after I pull the art out of the camera. Seeing the glistening prints as they dry always drags a smile to my face.

It helps, having something to do with my hands. Something with steps and an ending.

Just as I hang the last photo on the string line to dry, Anna calls me from upstairs.

'Coming!'

Yesterday, we drove out to Burrator so I could take more photographs, but my head had barely been in it. The drizzle misted the lens more than once, but I didn't even curse. We took a few pictures that Anna labelled goofy and princess-pretty and called it a day. We'd both needed some time off from the world and the reality.

And as expected, she'd been thoroughly disappointed in the way our parents had reacted – the usual blame shifting.

If it hadn't been for the shared physical features, I'd have given my right arm that they weren't our biological parents.

Examining the first photo, I test the clip that holds it aloft, giving it a small tug until I'm certain it feels secure. When I'm satisfied, I step back, arms crossed, the image already losing its hold on me.

I'm not entirely pleased with the batch. The things that had caught my eye, the details that urged me to press the shutter... they somehow feel overshadowed by something else: it's been two days.

Two days since Crane's note arrived, and I still haven't found the right

words to answer him.

For all my talk about emotion and art and layered intent, I can't string together one fucking sentence.

My mood has soured. Anna thinks it's because I'm angry at her soon-to-be-ex, Howard, and sure – I am. But mostly I've been stuck inside my own head, chewing on possibilities.

Climbing the fifteen concrete steps that separate the basement from the rest of my house, I make a decision: I'm going to finish the space. I'm going to stop this prison nonsense and get a little more hands-on. The arts programmes I applied to last month probably will not send so much as an acknowledgment. And if the dedicated minions of bureaucracy do decide to grace me with their opinions, it probably won't be this year.

I'm too much of a coward to go for Greenland, so I sent applications to photography projects across the Nordic countries instead.

But now, trailing the rugged concrete edges, I realise—

This is my house. The new life I've started without Ron. And it's been waiting covered in dust for way too long for me to pick up my own pieces.

More than a year has passed since I moved in, and the basement has remained half-finished. Not so much out of laziness as a refusal to face the truth: I'd bought it to get away from Ron, from the questions of why things had ended, and how far I had allowed myself to drift.

When the chemical scent from the developer trays finally thins and the scent of Anna's cinnamon rolls in the kitchen takes hold of me, I step out of the dark with a calm I rarely feel. There are worse things than having a pastry chef for a sister.

Anna is already rifling through the pile of today's mail.

Not that I asked her to.

'There's a sale on at IKEA,' she announces, holding up a brochure. 'You still need frames, right?'

'Do I?' I mutter, stepping towards the little cubby under the stairs where the house hides a cramped toilet and a miniature sink.

Of course I need frames. I haven't even had a chance to hang a single photo that does not contain something from the house viewing. The abstract artwork is definitely not my thing.

Peeling off my nitrile gloves, I hear her call out again: 'Why's there a letter from the Icelandic Arts Group and... *Sámi* Cultural Centre?'

I suppress a groan.

Well, it appears there *are* bureaucrats somewhere in the world actually doing their jobs.

I hadn't told her I'd applied for visual arts grants in those countries. It had been a spontaneous, half-hearted attempt weeks ago driven by anger – at myself – for not daring to do what I'd always wanted.

'Just... projects I applied to,' I offer, drying my hands.

She huffs. 'You're going to Iceland? Do you hate heat now?'

I chuckle and promptly drop the towel on the floor.

As I bend to retrieve it, she adds casually: 'Who's E. Crane?'

My head bangs hard against the underside of the stair frame as if she'd pulled a string attached to my spine. Stars burst across my vision. I welcome the pain. Because it slows me just enough to stop me from making a complete idiot of myself by rushing out and yanking the envelope from her fingers.

'Stone...' She squints, trying to make out the rest of the address, but I swoop in and grab the letter before she can read it in full. Scooping up the rest of the post to disguise my suspiciously intense interest in it, I snatch the Norwegian administrative dread last and sandwich the Stonebrook's letter between the other envelopes.

'Just... projects,' I murmur.

Not entirely a lie.

I rush out onto the cold porch, ignoring the rain that's starting to piss sideways in thin, needling gusts. Lowering myself on the rattan chair, the cushion sighs beneath me as I damn near squeal before tearing into Crane's envelope.

Inside is a single card that says: *'Deal.'*

I glare. My mind static-hums.

'What deal?' My fingers flip the card over, brows drawing tighter, but to no avail.

Blank.

I check the inside of the envelope again. Nothing.

Then it crashes into me – *my letter!*

With my heart threatening to break out of my chest, I dart back into the kitchen, scrambling as I search for the scrap of paper I'd meant to *burn*, not *send!*

Anna peeks around the archway from the sitting room, chestnut hair fanning over the white wood, a cup of tea in one hand, her brows faintly furrowed. The other – somewhat darker – arches higher. She got them tinted

this morning as a little well-earned self-love.

They look... aggressive, but to each their own.

Then I realise – so does the smirk. It's got a tremor under it.

Too... guilty almost.

'What are you looking for?' she asks, somehow far too pleased with herself.

I do a double take at that grin, my eyes narrowing.

'There was a letter...' I mutter, glaring at the table. 'Next to the candles.'

I tap my index finger against the desk nervously.

'The one with the poem?' she asks.

Life drains out of me.

Her smile stretches wider. Entirely unapologetic.

'I sent it with the divorce papers,' she says, too casually for the emotional arson she's just committed.

My lungs forget how to work; my ticker flatlines.

'So,' she adds, sweet as poison, 'are you going to tell me who E. Crane is, and why you're writing poems to him?'

And now? I'm hyperventilating.

I've spent two days tearing my hair out over how not to scare him off – weighing every word like it might shatter this contact – when in reality, the arrow had already been loosed, flying through the dark without my permission.

Then it hits – he *didn't* reject it.

It settles somewhere between panic and thrill.

Jerking upright, I immediately bolt into the basement to grab my phone.

Because it looks like I need to get hold of Rebecca and ask what forms Elias and I would need to complete.

My stomach drops even as my pulse kicks into overdrive.

Nothing says stable decision-making like requesting a photo shoot.

In prison.

Because a man wrote one word on a card.

I'll just... bring my own straitjacket while I'm at it.



The Author

N. VON WOLF writes dark, emotionally intense romances where desire collides with danger and power always has a price. Her stories blend myth, dystopia, and slow-burn obsession, featuring morally grey characters, lush prose, and worlds built to unravel both reader and heroine. Influenced by Eastern European folklore, Scandinavian myth, and Celtic mysticism, and the complexities of today's world, her work explores the line between surrender and survival – often with teeth.

When not writing, she works as a Technical Engineer Team Lead and balances life as a mother and wife.

Expect bloodstained love stories, broken heroes, and heroines who refuse to stay soft.

She genuinely loves hearing from readers. Reviews, messages, and reader feedback mean the world to her.

You can get in touch with her via www.nvonwolf.com or on Social Media: <https://linktr.ee/nvonwolf>.

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